EVASION, PRIVATE EVENTS, AND PRAGMATISM: A REPLY TO MOORE'S RESPONSE TO MY REVIEW OF CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF RADICAL BEHAVIORISM

WILLIAM M. BAUM

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

Moore's screed in response to my review of his book uses several rhetorical tricks to counter criticism without actually addressing it: he tries to preempt the transparency of his own orthodoxy by groundlessly accusing me of orthodoxy; he caricatures my criticisms to make them appear obviously wrong; he professes lack of understanding so as to dodge having to attempt a genuine response; and he engages in pejorative labeling to dismiss the criticisms without analysis. From a scientific and pragmatic point of view, private events are a mistake, precisely because they are private. They cannot serve as independent variables, as Moore suggests, because they cannot be measured; ''private independent variable'' is a contradiction in terms. When we carefully examine locutions like ''observe'' and ''report on,'' we discover that they entail only public verbal and nonverbal behavior, not objects and not private events as objects. A person in pain is not reporting on anything, is engaging in public verbal and nonverbal pain-behavior, and an infant or a dog may be considered to be in pain. The public behavior is all that matters, because determining whether a person is really in pain privately is impossible. The same is true of any private event, and the control of the public behavior on which the verbal community comments lies in the public environment. We cannot have two sets of principles, one for verbal behavior and one for nonverbal behavior or one for humans and one for other animals.

Key words: radical behaviorism, behavior analysis, molar view, private events, pragmatism, B. F. Skinner

---

In response to my review of his book (Baum, 2011), Moore (2011) has written a screed. I will call it ''Moore's screed'' (MS). In MS, he uses several crude rhetorical tricks to counter criticism without actually addressing it.

One trick is preemption. Recognizing perhaps that his embrace of Skinner's ideas smacks of orthodoxy, Moore accuses his critic of orthodoxy. Yet the signs of orthodoxy are everywhere evident in MS. We are told that ideas in contention are ''obvious.'' We are presented with an uncritical recitation of Skinner's conceptions about private events. Moore quotes Skinner again and again without comment, much as a fundamentalist Christian would quote from the Bible. Like an orthodox priest, he charges that the unbeliever doesn't understand the scripture.

Another rhetorical trick much used in MS is caricature. Repeatedly, Moore distorts some portion of my review until it is made to seem absurd. For example, I wrote that his description of behavior analysis and his presentation of radical behaviorism were incomplete. His description of the science omits almost all of the advances that occurred since 1960 to the present—research in choice, behavioral economics, adjunctive behavior, and so on. His treatment of radical behaviorism omits almost all of the writings of behaviorists since Skinner. What part of ''incomplete'' does Moore fail to grasp? Instead of addressing the many omissions, he turns the criticism into something I never said—that he should have written only about the material he omitted. Then he mocks me by writing that I was asking for a different book, based only on my interests, even suggesting an absurd title. On top of that, he displays a strange animus toward the researchers who got their training in the Harvard pigeon lab, particularly students of Herrnstein, who have made contributions out of proportion to their numbers. By this disgraceful performance, he attempts to mask the legitimate concern that his book fails to acknowledge a great deal of research and philosophical work relevant to his topic.

MS also contains many caricatures of the points I made about private events, but I will try to clarify the points further below.

A third rhetorical trick appearing in MS is profession of lack of understanding. This sounds modest, but by throwing responsibility back on the critic (me), it effectively removes the responsibility of the author (Moore) to respond to the criticism. A more constructive approach, assuming the lack of understanding is real, would have been to take one's best guess and try to answer that.

doi: 10.1901/jeab.2011.95-141

The fourth rhetorical trick that occurs prominently in MS is pejorative labeling. Moore calls me a methodological behaviorist, which, everyone knows, is a bad thing. He engages in distortion here, too. Skinner (1961/1945) identified the views of Stevens and Boring as ''methodological behaviorism,'' meaning by this that they saw scientific method as overcoming the problems inherent in studying subjective phenomena. They preserved the distinction between subjective and objective worlds while maintaining that one could study objective events that reflected subjective events. By this definition, most experimental psychologists, particularly cognitive psychologists, are methodological behaviorists, because they consider behavior to be indicative of inner processes or mechanisms in the mind or a conceptual brain. Radical behaviorism eschews such dualism, subscribing instead to a monism, consistent with Skinner's idea of the ''one world'' and consistent with the requirements of a natural science.

Moore accuses me of being a methodological behaviorist, thereby insinuating that I accept objective–subjective dualism and promote the study of the objective. He manages to make this absurd claim by a sort of bait-and-switch maneuver. He redefines methodological behaviorism in such a way that my arguments might seem consistent with it and then makes his accusation. I maintain, however, that my view is strictly monistic, that Skinner prevaricated about private events, and that, if one of us is a dualist, it is Moore. I say this because, when Skinner began including private events into his accounts of human behavior, he failed to avoid the very trap he saw Stevens and Boring as having fallen into. Moore, simplifying upon Skinner, falls right into the trap by maintaining the separate status of private and public events.

Why Private Events Are a Mistake

The problem with private events is that they are private. This means they are unobservable in the subject by the scientist. Moore's notion that a private event constitutes an unobservable independent variable is self-contradictory; an independent variable must be measurable. He claims that explanations of behavior relying on private events are ''no more troublesome than an explanation of earthquakes and continental drift in terms of plate tectonics or evolution in terms of descent with modification and natural selection'' (p. xxx). But the movements of tectonic plates and the reproductive success of different types within a population of organisms are measurable natural events, and their relation to earthquakes and natural selection are clear and comprehensible. Scientifically valid ''interpretations'' of behavior in everyday life can be constructed, but they omit private events and rely on observable history and present context. In contrast with tectonic plates and natural selection, we know nothing of the connection between private events and public behavior; it is murky and will remain so at least until neuroscience clarifies it. The usual objection to this point is to maintain that private events are nonetheless real, because the subject himself can observe them. This assertion, however, immediately involves a paradox, because if the subject can observe and report on private events, then his reports could be taken as data, and that is exactly what Stevens and Boring maintained. So, who is the methodological behaviorist now?

The solution to the paradox lies in a careful analysis of locutions like ''observe'' and ''report on.'' Common sense, which is really just folk psychology, says that observing and reporting are activities that may be applied to different objects. In this way, observing a cow differs from observing a flower in that the one activity—observing—is applied to two different objects. This raises difficult questions. Who does the observing, and where is the observer relative to the objects? We discover that the common-sense view depends upon an assumed subjective–objective dualism, in which the observing occurs inside while the objects exist outside. This is exactly the incoherent formulation that behaviorism seeks to avoid (Baum, 2005).

Skinner (1969) saw the solution to the problem, but in a different context—when he wrote about copy theory, seeing, and ''seeing without the thing seen.'' His argument was that, for example, seeing a cow and seeing a flower were not the same activity directed to two different objects, representations, or copies, but two different activities. The activities of seeing a cow and seeing a flower differ qualitatively; the cow and flower are attributes of the two, not separate from them. Moreover, Skinner maintained, seeing a

cow with eyes open in daylight and seeing a cow with eyes closed or in the dark (''imagination'') have more in common with one another than do seeing a cow and seeing a flower. Thus, Skinner suggested a completely behavioral interpretation of seeing.

The behavior of seeing a cow, however, is not private. The person who sees a cow orients towards it, talks about it, perhaps approaches it. At the least, he talks about having seen it afterwards. These public events lead us to say, for example, ''Mary sees (saw) the cow.'' Similarly, observing a cow and reporting on a cow are public events, possibly just utterances like, ''There is a cow'' or ''That cow is a Holstein.'' Following Skinner's insight about seeing, we conclude that observing or reporting on a cow and observing or reporting on a flower are not the same activity directed at two different objects, but two different activities. The behavior of reporting on a cow differs from the behavior of reporting on a flower, and the one activity is occasioned by different (public) environmental events than the other. The utterance ''There is a cow'' differs from the utterance ''There is a flower'' in both form and context, just like any other distinct pair of activities.

Applying this insight to supposed reports on private events, we see that here again we are dealing with different utterances, and again the different utterances are occasioned by public environmental events. If Jane says, ''I have a pain in my foot,'' she is not reporting on a hidden object. The utterance is occasioned by a sympathetic audience and, possibly, an injury to her foot. In his mocking description of a hypothetical interaction between Rachlin and me, Moore suggests that my complaint of a toothache to Rachlin would result in his giving me an aspirin. Moore fails to see that Rachlin would give me the aspirin, not because he believed in a hidden toothache-thing, but because my complaint sets up an occasion on which his giving me an aspirin will be rewarded. Even if I am faking, he will be rewarded.

Moore, along with some philosophers, thinks it is obvious that someone can be in pain but not show it, but this is an impossibility, because to be in pain *is* to show it (Rachlin, 1985). If Jane could be really-in-pain-privately and either show it or not show it, then her being really-in-pain-privately would be irrelevant. From the perspective of the verbal community around her, her being really-in-pain-privately would be both inaccessible and irrelevant. If Tom, who is with Jane, says that she is really in pain, he is telling us something not so much about Jane as about his own tendencies to be sympathetic and helpful (assuming he is not a sadist). From a pragmatic point of view (Baum, 2005; James, 1974/1907), the question of whether Jane is really-in-pain-privately can make no difference, because it is unanswerable; her public pain-behavior is all that matters. If she insists that she really is in pain, her insistence is only more pain-behavior. If an infant or a dog exhibits pain-behavior (crying, whimpering, limping, etc.), we respond sympathetically, because we do not consider such beings able to dissemble. Is something private involved? Do we think the dog is really-in-pain-privately? Animal-rights activists will say this, but they are no more able to be certain than anyone else, and the point of their rhetoric is to induce sympathetic behavior in those who care for dogs.

When Moore suggests that the only two possibilities are that a person in pain is reporting on a private event versus reporting on public circumstances, he gets the whole situation wrong. A person in pain is not reporting on anything, private or public. The pain-behavior, verbal and nonverbal, flows from a history of interaction with others going back to childhood and is occasioned in the present by the presence of others who might reward it with sympathy or other responses and, possibly, by a present injury. Pain is not a thing, any more than the sensation of red is a thing. If a pigeon pecks at a red key rather than at a green key, we say the pecking is controlled by the red and green keys, not by some private red and green representations (things).

Conclusion

Two of Skinner's brilliant contributions were his recognition of response rate as a datum and his invention of the concept of stimulus control. These both entail a temporally extended conception of behavior. A response rate cannot occur at a moment, but only as a pattern over a period of time. A discriminative stimulus cannot modulate a response rate except over an extended period of time. It is time that behavior analysts took these concepts and the concept of verbal

behavior more seriously. An utterance like ''I feel like going home'' is an episode of verbal behavior with history and context (i.e., stimulus control) to explain it. Verbal behavior is no more *done* than is other behavior; it occurs naturally, without agency, just like all behavior (Baum, 1995). And it does not require any private events. It may be explained in the same way as other human behavior (e.g., going home) and in the same way as the behavior of other animals. If we have two sets of principles, one for verbal behavior and one for nonverbal behavior, or one for humans and one for other animals, we have failed. A coherent science requires one set of principles.

REFERENCES

Baum, W. M. (1995). Radical behaviorism and the concept of agency. *Behaviorology, 3*, 93–106.

Baum, W. M. (2005). *Understanding behaviorism: Behavior, culture, and evolution* (Second Ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Baum, W. M. (2011). What is radical behaviorism? A review of Jay Moore's *Conceptual Foundations of Radical Behaviorism. Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior, 95*, xxx–xxx.

James, W. (1974/1907). *Pragmatism and four essays from The Meaning of Truth*. New York: New American Library, (Reprinting of editions of 1907 and 1909.)

Moore, J. (2008). *Conceptual foundations of radical behaviorism*. Cornwall-on-Hudson, NY: Sloan Publishing.

Moore, J. (2011). A review of Baum's review of *Conceptual Foundations of Radical Behaviorism. Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior, 95*, xxx–xxx.

Rachlin, H. (1985). Pain and behavior. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 8*, 43–83.

Skinner, B. F. (1961/1945). The operational analysis of psychological terms. In *Cumulative record* (Enlarged ed., pp. 272–286). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Originally published in 1945.

Skinner, B. F. (1969). Behaviorism at fifty. In *Contingencies of reinforcement* (pp. 221–268). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.